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Ex-C.I.A. Aide Called a Principal in Iran Affair

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WASHINGTON, April 22 — The special prosecutor in the Iran-contra inquiry said today that Thomas Clines, a former Central Intelligence Agency official, was a "principal" in his criminal investigation.

Mr. Clines worked with Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North in efforts to free hostages in Iran and supply the rebel forces in Nicaragua, according to a variety of news accounts over the last five months.

The prosecutor, Lawrence E. Walsh, went before a private session of the special House investigative committee to urge the panel not to grant Mr. Clines immunity from prosecution.

Mr. Walsh's statement afterward was the first public indication that Mr. Clines was under criminal investigation. He retired from the C.I.A. in 1978 after service in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Since then, he has been the subject of investigations involving the use of old intelligence contacts in business deals.

Immunity Decision Delayed

The House committee, which had planned to vote today on the question of Mr. Clines's immunity, put off a decision after Mr. Walsh's appearance.

The committee did, however, vote to compel the testimony of Rear Adm. John M. Poindexter, President Reagan's former national security adviser, by granting him immunity from prosecution based on his testimony. The companion Senate committee approved the grant of immunity Tuesday.

The chairman of the House panel, Representative Lee H. Hamilton, an Indiana Democrat, said his panel had also voted on immunity grants for other witnesses today, but he declined to identify them. A person familiar with the votes said none of the others were key figures in the case.

With the public hearings of the Congressional committees scheduled to begin May 5, senators and representatives said considerable progress had been made in tracing the flow of money used in the arms sales and in the operations to supply the contras, as the Nicaraguan rebels are known.

"I feel relatively confident we have traced most of the money," said Senator Warren B. Rudman, a New Hampshire Republican who is vice chairman of the Senate panel. "Once we get Poindexter and North," he added, "everything else will fall into place."

The committees have promised Mr. Walsh not to question Colonel North, who is reported to have organized the arms sales to Iran and the Administration's activities on behalf of the contras, until June.

A breakthrough in understanding the financial transactions may have come Monday, when investigators interrogated Albert Hakim, an Iranian-American businessman who is said to have played a leading role in the transactions. Mr. Hakim is living abroad, and the interrogation took place in Paris.

Associated Is Jailed

Mr. Hakim was a business partner of Richard V. Secord, a retired Air Force major general and former Assistant Secretary of Defense, who worked with Colonel North in both the arms sales to Iran and the efforts to supply the contras. Mr. Clines is also a longtime associate of General Secord, and that relationship apparently drew him into the Iran-contra affair.

In 1984, a company in which Mr. Clines was the public partner and with which General Secord and Edwin P. Wilson were also connected, pleaded guilty to overcharging the Pentagon in an arms transaction with Egypt. Mr. Wilson, also a former C.I.A. official, is now in prison, having been convicted of illegally supplying arms to Libya.

Until today, Mr. Clines had appeared to be a peripheral figure in the Iran-contra matter. According to news accounts, he helped Colonel North obtain a ship that was used in an aborted effort to obtain the release of hostages last year. He was also said to have been active in the private network in the United States that aided the contras.

Mr. Walsh, whose official title is independent counsel, did not say today what evidence he had of criminal offenses by Mr. Clines. He did say, however, that Mr. Clines "appears to be a principal in the activities which are under investigation."